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Thoughts on the HISTORY of ALPHABETIC
WRITING. By MICHAEL KEARNEY,
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THE origin of the art of expressing the conceptions of the mind by visible, permanent signs, hath at all times been an object of curiosity. Cicero adduces the invention of alphabetic writing as a proof of the cælestial nature of the human soul. Many who have speculated on the subject, overpowered by a view of the utility of the art, and the comprehensive sagacity which the formation of it implies, have ascribed its introduction to the immediate inspiration of the Deity. The Heathens, in this opinion, conformed to their usual practice of assigning a divine author for every useful and extraordinary invention. But Christian writers have also held the divine infusion of this art, though there are different opinions concerning the time of the communication;

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munication: some supposing it made to Adam; while others consider the promulgation of the Mosaic law as its æra. Without producing the positive arguments that may be urged against this opinion, we may observe, that it is unnecessary to have recourse to it: for however inadequate the energy of any individual human intellect may seem to the completion of alphabetic writing in its present form; yet a succession of inventive powers might have raised it from the rudest beginning to the most astonishing excellence. This appears to be now the prevalent opinion: yet though admirable ingenuity and erudition have been exerted in detailing the gradual expansion of the art from its nascent rudiments, several chasms in the progression seem to be still unfilled.

To attempt the supply of *this* deficiency, and to give a connected history of alphabetic writing, is the object of the paper now submitted to the consideration of the Academy.

THAT the propriety of the links, which I shall venture to supply, may be more clearly seen, it is unavoidable that I should trace the progress of writing as far as Warburton and others have described it. Alphabetic letters denote *sounds*; it is however probable, that the first step was a delineation of the forms of *things*; the conception, not the words expressing it, was what offered itself for communication, and it readily presented a naturally resembling, permanent mark. Here it may be observed, that most instituted signs may be traced to others suggested by nature; thus articulate words marking ideas by compact were
probably

probably formed from the cries by which nature directs us to express our feelings. History confirms this account of the origin of the art; as picture-writing has been found in use among many nations somewhat raised above the savage state, and not yet arrived at refinement. Picture-writing was improved into a more artificial mode, and gradually passed through the several hieroglyphic forms enumerated by Warburton with erudition and accuracy. He has followed the successive shades of hieroglyphic denotation, beginning with the rude essays of picture-writing, and advancing through analogy, emblem, &c. to the use of signs by institution or the arbitrary characters of the Chinese. He justly observed that the earliest species of arbitrary characters, of which those used by the Chinese seem to be a just example, were probably derived from the hieroglyphic forms, and of this resemblance the Chinese letters still retain some faint vestiges. The likeness continually declining by the careless delineation of current use, their association with the *things* signified, which they now ceased to exhibit to the eye, became weaker, while their connection with sounds, their brother signs, grew stronger; hence at length they seemed, and in fact became, solely representative of them. Here Warburton ended. Monsieur Goguet, “*De l’origine des loix, des arts, &c.*” advanced farther, and conjectured, that the next step in the series was made by the introduction of marks denoting syllables, or the more compound elements of words. This mode of writing still prevails among the Ethiopians and some Indian nations; and, according to Kœmpfer, in Japan. It is probable that syllabical denotation succeeded to verbal, as Monsieur Goguet has conjectured; but of this transition he has assigned

assigned no reason. It seems to me, that it may be accounted for in this manner: we cannot suppose that writing was improved even to this degree of excellence before language was in some measure cultivated: but one of the first artifices, that occurs in the refinement of language, is composition or the union of distinct words in the formation of new terms, which the increased wants and enlarged ideas of men in the progress of society would require. To express such compound sounds, the marks of the several constituent sounds would be joined together. It was soon observed, that many of these ingredient sounds were the same with others non-significant, that has occurred as parts of uncompounded words, that is, as syllables: hence was easily suggested the artifice of denoting such syllabic parts by distinct marks; the combination and varied arrangement of which would represent the numerous words of language compendiously, without the multitude of signs which verbal notation required. To this syllabic alphabet, it appears to me, that one entirely composed of consonants succeeded. The mind being now accustomed to analysis, the resolution of words into syllables would in time be followed by that of syllables into their component elements. But the variety of syllabic sounds chiefly arising from organic articulations or consonants; and the number of vowels or simple breathings being few; men would be contented to give marks to the first, leaving the others to be furnished by the reader. This conjecture becomes more probable, if, according to the opinion of Lord Monboddo, syllables in the primæval languages contained, each only one consonant. It is also supported by, and accounts for the nature of the Hebrew and some other oriental alphabets, which

which have no characters denoting vowels, the Maforetic punctuation being novel. In all the western alphabets both consonants and vowels have letters appropriated to them; because the art of writing was not imported from Asia into Europe, until the want of vowel marks had been found to be inconvenient. The addition of such marks brought this wonderful art to its present state of perfection.